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“College Life” or Something like It

Question: Prior to coming to college did anyone (family members, friends, teachers, etc.) tell you any stories about college? If so, how did they influence your idea of what college would be like?

Amy*: “Yes, my sister would tell me how much harder the classes were. She would also tell me how most of the boys were not boyfriend material and just wanted to have a good time. She also told me she learned a lot about alcohol. This prepared me to be ready for lots of homework and parties.”

Beth*: “People would talk about the fun things they did. My dad went home and he told me all about being chief and being in a frat and what U of I was like. My mom told me about being in a house and stuff. Everyone talked about their crazy stories. They made it sound like the greatest time and a lot of fun.”

When you see or hear the word “college” what images or experiences come to mind? Some reminisce about endless nights out with friends, or maybe endless nights of studying in the library. Some may think of crazy frat parties. What are the things that influence our perception of the college experience? Society and the media feeds us images and tell us stories for years about college life leading up to the experience. Are they accurate depictions? Through my research I sought to address the idea of perception and reality in the realm of college life, and where the two meet.

The surveys I handed out asked students a number of questions that dealt with outside influences that affected their perception of the college experience. They were asked if they had

been told stories or seen or read anything that affected their idea of college life and to talk about these examples in as much details as possible. Of the various questions asked of them the students were most willing to answer in the most detail concerning the *stories* they had been told about college, most of which came from their parents. I find it interesting that students found stories from their parents most held the most impact because of the idea of college as *in loco parentis*. The university is oftentimes depicted as taking the role of the parent to its students while at college away from their own. Ironically, parents are passing down this idea of *in loco parentis* to their own children in their stories of college life. In these stories I also found it amusing that besides stories of academia an overwhelming amount included scenes having to do with partying, drinking and the social life of college. One student told of his cousin drunkenly falling out of a second story window and stealing a bicycle as a getaway vehicle. “It made me think that college was the craziest place on earth,” he wrote. Some stories were even too inappropriate to pass along. Michelle* said, “My older cousins did go away to college but I was too young to hear the stories. All I know was my aunt always said how crazy he was at school.” Even though she wasn’t told specific stories about her cousin’s college activities the point was still clearly made. “I thought college would be a nonstop party.” Because of these wild and crazy stories (or sometime lack thereof) most students expected college to be wild and crazy as well. Students who visited friends or family members at college were also affected by its “party feel.” Though they had heard stories or seen movies or television shows depicting the college party life, visiting and experiencing it made the social aspect of college all the more real to them. This has been a topic of discussion in class. Many agree that college is a kind of subculture. While attending college students are able to experience situations and opportunities that will

most likely not be available to them after graduation. While college part of the “real world” it has an interesting twist to it.

Rebellion is another theme related to the college experience. Many stories that students were told included debauchery committed with friends while at college. Sarah* wrote, “My dad told me about being a Fiji [a fraternity on his campus] and they stole an expensive oil painting from the Beta chapter. The Betas retaliated though by shooting their [the Fijis’] snow owl and killing it (the owl was their mascot).” Quite a few of their stories also included intervention by the law. Students relayed stories of friends or family members who were arrested during their time at college, mostly due to underage drinking. What is interesting in these stories is students’ tendency or feelings of need to disrespect law enforcement. One student wrote, “My dad urinated on a cop car while he was drunk so he was arrested and thrown in jail. While in jail he began smoking pot until the officers caught him.” For some college students, with newfound independence comes rebellion against authority as well. It could be due to the fact that some students would rather not have their universities as acting *in loco parentis*. *The Strawberry Statement* is an excellent example of student rebellion and these stories often reminded me of the novel. According to students, these kinds of stories gave college more of a dangerous appeal.

Another theme that surfaced in these stories was the opportunity for social and romantic bonds that college presents. One student’s mother told her the story of how she and the girl’s father had met and fell in love at college. This story influenced the girl in a bit of an old fashioned way – she believed that she would meet her future spouse in college. I found this quite interesting because the idea of finding a spouse at college has definitely been around for awhile and is obviously still in existence, especially in the minds of female students. However, I believe the idea has progressed from attending college in order to find a spouse to the simple probability

that you will meet your spouse during college. The emphasis now lies more on the actual experience of college for collegiate purposes. People also expect to make strong social bonds with friends they make in college. Beth* wrote about the camaraderie that developed between her father and the other guys in his house. Because they all remained friends even after college, she in turn expected to make friends of a lifetime. College is often seen as the place and time during which many people come into their own. As we discover ourselves in more depth we acquire friends who compliment that as well.

Question: Prior to coming to college, are there any scenes from books, movies, television shows (anything depicted in the media) that influenced your idea of what college would be like? The media is another huge influencer of people's perceptions of college life. For this part of the survey students very rarely mentioned books as having a big impact on their expectations of college. Movies were another matter. A certain group of mainstream comedies almost always came up in students' answers to the question of media influences. *Animal House*, *Old School*, *Van Wilder* and *Legally Blonde* (especially with girls) were usually listed as media influences. These kinds of movies depict college as a huge party, often shirking the responsibility and work that must come with play while at school if one hopes to succeed. The Greek life is definitely heavily concentrated on in many of the movies that students listed as influential. This is quite fitting because the Greek system is one that is college-oriented, especially here at the U of I. Even though someone may not personally know anyone in a fraternity or sorority, they still link Greeks with college. The Greek system could have been highlighted in these students' answers due to the fact that the U of I has one of the largest Greek systems in the nation. This kind of influence was not specifically asked of the students but definitely exists. Student's perceptions often varied with the type of college being discussed. The fact that the U of I is a huge state

school, is in the Big Ten and is located in a college town definitely affects people's perceptions of life on campus. The idea of smaller or private colleges influenced expectations differently, especially social aspects of college. Natalie* said, "Both of my parents went to a small college in Romeoville so neither ever experienced the social life we have here." Another student wrote, "My mom went to a private college so her stories were rather bland." In terms of the social scene on campus, people definitely categorize the degree to which it exists depending on the type of school/campus. Because potential students are influenced by the size of the university they might attend, stories or the media also affect their perception of college differently.

Finally, the surveys asked students to compare their previous notions of what they thought college would be like to the reality of college that they have experienced thus far. The predominant reaction to this question was the realization of how much work is required of a student. Outside influences, especially the media and even the stories that we are told, do a great job of highlighting comical and fun experiences while neglecting to depict the actual amount of work and responsibility that goes into college. Most people remarked that although they had been lightly warned by parents and teachers of the difficulty of classes and tests, they did not expect college to be as difficult academically as they have found it to be. From movies about college many students thought college would simply be "one big party." Most agreed that these scenes from the movies and television shows hold some truth but not completely. Even in the stories told to us by family members and friends we are still able to recognize college as a place of higher learning as well as a place of immense social possibility. However, though we recognize this large contrast and are able to point out the deviation from reality the notion of college follows, we will more than likely pass along the same perceptions to future generations. Movies and television, if for no other reason than public interest and ratings will probably

continue to primarily depict college's social perks. Instead of passing along stories of how hard we studied for our exams or the endless hours and nights we spent cooped up in the library or in class or lab we will be much more likely to tell our children or nieces and nephews of wild nights out or the hilarious adventures we have with friends. It's not that we don't have plenty of stories on how hard we worked in college, it's that we wish to share a different college experience with others because those are the memories we hold dear.

Although these differences do exist between perception of the college experience and the actual experience, most students were not phased by the change in their idea of college. They seemed to remedy the difference by taking their own perspective on experiences and influences. Many students made a fantastic point in their surveys on the college experience. The message constantly appeared in their answers: college is what *you* make of it. College supplies the independence and the opportunity for students to try out new things, to succeed or fail and keep going (or give in). There isn't a set path that we all must travel down that defines the college experience. That much is imminently clear through a small sampling of surveys from college students. Through the process of discovery and experience many students praised their time at college thus far. Some, however, have been disillusioned. One student wrote that, "College is not as beautiful and fun as it looks from the outside." Our experience and influence on our college experience creates that experience and life for us. Whether the notion of college life changes in our mind or not the final result is ultimately left in our hands.